

禪

# CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 37 June, 1984

## WHY SENTIENT BEINGS ARE SENTIENT BEINGS Lecture given Sunday, June 10, 1984

According to Buddhism, the original nature of sentient beings is identical to Buddha-nature. But to us this identity seems completely absent: the Buddhas are perfectly wise whereas sentient beings are profoundly ignorant. How has this difference arisen?

The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment tells us that Buddha-nature and ignorance are one. Both have existed from beginningless time. Sentient beings have always been ignorant, but this ignorance is only a different form of Buddha-nature. The identity between ignorance and Buddha-nature is similar to the identity of ice at the North Pole with the water in the ocean. The same substance can be both ice and water depending on its location. We can further extend the analogy. The ice at the North Pole is permanently frozen just as sentient beings have always been ignorant. And as some ice may occasionally melt due to climactic irregularities, some few sentient beings do attain Buddhahood. So ignorance and Buddhahood, just like ice and water, are essentially the same although they may appear different according to perspective. The difference, thus, that we perceive between Buddhas and sentient beings is really but an illusion.

This raises an interesting question. Buddhism teaches us that sentient beings can become Buddhas. But if Buddhas and sentient beings are one by nature, what is to prevent Buddhas from falling back and once more becoming sentient beings?

According to Ch'an, nirvana and samsara (birth and death) both exist and do not exist. They exist from the perspective of sentient beings because sentient beings are attached to a sense of self and thus they cling to form and appearance. Samsara and nirvana do not exist from the perspective of a Buddha because Buddha is unattached to a sense of self and is independent of



form and appearance. But the Buddha will assume form and appearance for the benefit of sentient beings. A Buddha can manifest equally the dharma of samsara or nirvana depending on the needs of sentient beings. So just as water can freeze again into ice, there is nothing to prevent a Buddha from turning again into a sentient being. But sentient beings who are manifestations of Buddhas are very different from the sentient beings who have never been Buddhas. The former have become sentient beings because of their wisdom and the latter remain sentient beings because of their karma -- their impurity.

What is this impurity? It is the result of attachment to the four kinds of phenomena. The first of these is the ego, the second refers to a man or group of people (the object of the ego), the third, an extension of the second, refers to all sentient beings, and the fourth is life, the temporal continuum of self and all others.

As illustration of the four kinds of phenomena, let us say a young man meets a girl and the two fall in love. If the two are deeply in love, it is unlikely that one day they will feel for each other and the next day they will not. More commonly, people want to remain in love for ever -- even until they reach Buddhahood. People in love do not care that religion does not view great attachment very favorably. They would say, "It does not matter even if we go to hell so long as we stay in love." Here we can perceive three of the four kinds of phenomena: the ego who falls in love, the person who is beloved, and the desired continuity of love throughout time, or life. Through the couple's relationship a child is likely to be born. Its parents will aspire for it to have a great career, get married early and have a large family. Moreover, when it in turn has children, the child will probably aspire similarly, as will its own children and their children and so on throughout endless generations. Thus the third, general phenomenon of sentient beings.

I once asked someone if he wanted to become a monk. He said, "It is not that I don't want to become a monk, but my father would like to have some grandchildren." So I said, "Well, why don't you first have a son, and then become a monk? After you have a son, you will have fulfilled your obligation." He responded, "Sure, that's what I'll do." But I assured him that he would never leave home after he had a son. He would definitely want the son to marry so that he himself could have grandchildren. This is life for all sentient beings and it is without end.

These four kinds of phenomena are but a mirage arising and perishing through causes and conditions. Holding on to the phenomena as if they were real causes the attachment to ego. But the ego by itself is impossible to establish. It is only through interaction with others -- with an individual, a group, or sentient beings in the continuum of life -- that the attachment arises which is the cause of the feeling of ego or self.



Attachment can be of two kinds; it can be directed mainly towards outer objects, relationships or events, or it can be mainly self-centered. There is a mayor of certain city who is already over fifty years old and has never been married. With no family do you think that he has fewer attachments? Not at all. It is as if the city totally belongs to him. He always says, "I want my city to be like this, I want it to be like that." This is the first kind of attachment. Those whose attachment is of the second kind care little for interaction and external objects but they are deeply bound to their ego. They feel no sense of duty and exist without direction. Since the first type of attachment necessitates fulfillment of responsibilities, it is preferable to the second.

There was once a general who understood the first kind of attachment. He would assign important jobs only to men with wife and children. Having found the appropriate man for a job, he would have his family placed in a very secure environment both to prevent anxiety and to guard against his desertion!

We have seen that impurity comes as a result of attachment to the four phenomena. But what is it that indefinitely sustains impurity? I will give two answers.

When the self is erroneously taken as eternal, attachment arises not only for the self of the present but also the self of future. So as someone makes preparations for the future, he creates karma relating to the future. Having by the end of his life accumulated much karma of the future, he must be reborn to experience the consequences of this karma. Since they constantly prepare for the future, sentient beings must time after time suffer rebirth. Always thus attached, they remain impure indefinitely. This is the first answer.

My second answer pertains to practitioners on inner or outer paths who seek to reach Buddhahood, nirvana, or any kind of heavenly world. These people feel aversion to the world and a corresponding desire for escape. Practitioners on outer paths who seek residence in heavenly worlds can certainly attain their desire through accumulation of merit. But their stay in these worlds is limited, for departure is unavoidable once the energy of their previous practice is exhausted. Similarly, those Buddhists who seek Buddhahood as an escape from the world may gain entrance into the "Convenient Pure Land." Though such practitioners may feel that they have achieved nirvana, they also will find as their power subsides that they are compelled to leave. Once either of these two kinds of practitioners is forced to leave, they immediately yearn to return. Time after time they work to accumulate sufficient merit to gain respite in the heavens. Thus they never lose their attachment and remain impure indefinitely.

It is attachment which causes impurity, and it is by attachment that impurity is sustained. If the ice is to melt into water -- if sentient beings are to become Buddhas -- then



there can be no attachment, no seeking, and no goal.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### NEWS ITEMS

Roshi Philip Kapleau searched for the roots of Ch'an in China, but recently he also went to Taiwan. On March 24, 1984, he visited Shih-fu in Taiwan. He visited the Nung Ch'an Temple and the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Chinese Culture University. He also held a discussion of questions and answers.

On Buddha's Birthday, May 13, 1984, 150 people attended ceremonies and activities throughout the day.


There were 12 participants for the first week and 10 participants for the full two weeks of the Spring retreat, May 27 to June 10.

On Monday, June 11, Shih-fu was visited by Master Miao Ran from Taiwan. He is the President of Business and Technology School in Taipei.

There was a beginners' class held on Saturday, June 16. Another will be held on July, 21, 1984 from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Please call for information.

The next retreat will be given from June 29 to July 6, 1984.

The Annual Membership Meeting will be held on July 15, 1984 at 9:00 A.M. All are welcome.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2024





The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.

CH'AN CENTER  
Institute of Chung-Hwa  
Buddhist Culture  
90-31 Corona Avenue  
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373

NON-PROFIT ORG  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
FLUSHING, N.Y.  
PERMIT NO. 1120

RETURN POSTAGE  
GUARANTEED